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NOAA SUPPORTS NAVY'S SEARCH FOR "SUNKEN WARBIRDS"

A NOAA-funded, remote-sensing survey of Lake Michigan completed a week-long hunt for historic World War II aircraft. A Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team recently concluded a remote sensing survey of the southern portion of Lake Michigan looking for sunken historic World War II aircraft. The team worked under the guidance of an underwater archaeologist from the Naval Historical Center. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The Navy is taking a leading role in the protection of military aircraft crash sites and NOAA has helped in locating and describing submerged cultural resources. The EOD team used side-scan sonar to determine the likely positions of sunken aircraft that were lost in accidents during the training of aviators. A major goal of the project was to assess historic information about the sites and to evaluate potential safety, biologic and economic hazards from a number of factors including the impacts of invasive species such as zebra mussels.

The aircraft were lost during operations from the aircraft carriers USS *Wolverine* and USS *Sable*. Because these were training exercises, losses due to accidents were expected. Between 1942 and 1945, there were 122 aircraft losses and more than 200 separate deck accidents. Although the majority of these incidents resulted in only minor injuries, eight naval aviators lost their lives.

Approximately 120,000 successful landings took place, and an estimated 17,000 naval aviators qualified.

"The group of aircraft is the only collection of historic, World War II, Navy aircraft preserved in cold, fresh water," said Wendy Coble, aviation issues specialist in the Underwater Archaeology Branch of the Naval Historical Center. "This study has provided information not obtainable anywhere else."

In August 1942, the U.S. Navy commissioned USS *Wolverine* as its first inland aircraft carrier. The Navy added USS *Sable* a year later. Both were originally opulent passenger steamers, but after conversion they became the only side-wheel propelled carriers in the U.S. Navy, and likely the world. The majority of carrier qualifications during World War II occurred from the decks of *Sable* and *Wolverine* and a large number of landing signal officers and ground crew learned their trades on the two ships.

Wolverine launched its first aircraft in August 1942 and served as a training platform until November 1945 when both vessels were decommissioned. The ships were later scrapped.

The EOD unit's primary task is to look for sunken unexploded ordnance. Through this survey, the team gained valuable experience in locating submerged objects.

U.S. Navy EOD Mobile Unit 10 is stationed in Ft. Story, Va. The crew assisting The Naval Historical Center in this survey included active duty and reserve specialists.

The Naval Historical Center's Underwater Archaeology Branch has management responsibility for the Navy's historic ship and aircraft wrecks. The aircraft wrecks lost in Lake Michigan have long been of interest and this survey was the center's first opportunity to search for the wrecks. Information obtained will be included in a management plan for the entire assemblage of wrecks in Lake Michigan.

The mission of NOAA includes the exploration of our oceans and large inland bodies of water for the purpose of discovery and the advancement of knowledge. NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic

security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.

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